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DE RUEHFT #4380/01 2690848
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMCONSUL FRANKFURT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3462
INFO RUCNFRG/FRG COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 FRANKFURT 004380

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GM](#)

SUBJECT: Left Party Stumbles in Hesse

REF: a) 07 Berlin 1604, b) 07 Berlin 1457

Sensitive but unclassified; not for internet distribution.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. With the Left Party's national leadership focused on broadening its voter base, particularly in the west, it scrambled to undo damage caused by the Hesse Left's election of communist Pit Metz as its candidate in the January 27 state elections and his subsequent resignation. The Left's entry into the Hesse parliament would alter the political landscape there by making it more difficult to form a two-party majority. The embarrassing turn of events for the Left in Hesse, however, highlights the party's divisions and, perhaps, its limitations. The intervention of national party leaders Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi suggests that the national party leadership sees this election as too important to squander on an unelectable candidate. END SUMMARY.

The Saga of Pit Metz

¶2. (SBU) At its first party state convention August 24-26, the Left Party in Hesse elected former German Communist Party member and hardliner Peter (Pit) Metz as top candidate. The choice was a disaster. Metz quickly took the controversial position of ruling out any coalition with other parties, saying that the party would be a force of fundamental opposition. Ulrich Wilken, Chairman of the Hesse Left Party, told poloff and polspecialist that the Left's main constituencies in Hesse are the disaffected -- men in their forties, the unemployed and ''socially-conscious'' intelligentsia. The choice of Metz, however, threatened to alienate more moderate voters, such as union members. In fact, a September 6 Infratest poll revealed that Left Party support had fallen from 5% to 4%.

¶3. (SBU) Sensing the damage that could unfold with Metz as candidate, national Left Party leaders apparently intervened: on September 4, Metz traveled to Berlin to meet with Left Party leaders Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi. and on September 5, Metz stepped down. He explained that he did not realize his election could polarize the party. On September 8, the party held an extraordinary party convention and elected the moderate, well-known peace and union activist Willi van Ooyen. A national executive board member of the Left Party explained to Embassy Berlin Poloff September 20 that Metz had been ''overwhelmed'' by his new role, his family had been negatively affected by his election, and his children harassed at school.

¶4. (SBU) The Metz saga reveals the division between the two parties that recently combined to form the Left Party: the Socialist Unity Party (PDS), which generally supported Metz, and Alternative for Social Justice Party (WASG), which did not. The apparent intervention on the national level by Lafontaine and Gysi indicates that the party leadership was concerned about Metz's affect on the party's electoral fortunes. The national executive board member acknowledged the difficulty that Metz presented. He underlined that the Left Party needs time to reconcile the different views of the

party and develop a coherent party platform. For now, he said, the Left will focus on serving as an opposition voice, although he did not rule out serving in a government coalition.

A Threat to All Parties?

15. (SBU) Gernot Grumbach, head of the South Hesse SPD, told poloff and polspecialist that the SPD and the other parties had no comment throughout the Metz affair and that the Left Party was now the laughing stock of the local political scene. Despite its recent travails, however, the Left Party threatens to upset the political balance in Hesse if it succeeds in getting the necessary 5% of the vote to enter the state parliament.

16. (SBU) While the most likely next government remains a Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) coalition -- preserving Roland Koch as Minister President -- the Left's entry into the parliament could leave this coalition short of a majority of seats. In the September 6 poll, the CDU stood at 42% and the FDP at 8%. The SPD and Green Party are historical allies in Hesse but they currently stand at 32% and 10% respectively. Following the line of her party's national leadership, SPD lead candidate Andrea Ypsilanti has so far said she would not consider a coalition with the Left Party and no influential SPD leader has contradicted her assertion. Other possibilities include a three-party or a SPD-CDU grand coalition (something that Koch has said he rules out and that Ypsilanti sees as a worst-case scenario).

17. (SBU) COMMENT. The fate of Pit Metz reveals the importance that the national Left Party leadership places on this election, seeing it as its chance to break through in the West. The Hesse Left Party stands at a crossroads, internally divided on whether or not to moderate its views in exchange for a broader basis of support. If

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it succeeds in overcoming its internal divisions and mounts a moderate campaign, it could gain 5% of the vote and enter the parliament, a result that would greatly affect the other parties' ability to form a government. If it continues to stumble and be plagued by division, the Left Party could be facing a long period of frustration in Hesse and elsewhere in the West. END COMMENT.

18. This cable has been coordinated with Embassy Berlin.

POWELL